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SUBJECT: EXPERTS' PARADISE: THE ARGUMENTS AND THE ODDS FOR
A GOVERNMENT OF EXPERTS

REF: BUDAPEST 895 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: P/E ERIC V. GAUDIOSI; REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: A government of experts remains a persistent topic of conversation as prolonged gridlock continues to erode public confidence in Hungary's political class. Currently championed by the SzDSz, a government of experts is constitutionally possible but would likely not be politically empowered to do more than serve as a bridge to new elections. Although the image of an impartial technocratic cabinet dedicated to "crisis management" remains appealing, it is an improbable option in a country with no analogous precedent, few genuinely apolitical experts, and little public consensus for reform. End Summary.

TECHNO TOPS THE CHARTS

¶2. (C) As Parliament prepares to pick up where it left off in June, both commentators and average citizens continue to discuss the possibility of a government of experts. Past polling indicates that strong majorities support the idea, reflecting both deep frustration with the political class and a strong predisposition to value expertise. Despite the public's interest in the idea, polls also indicate that the vast majority of respondents believe that a government of experts is an unlikely scenario.

¶3. (C) Originally proposed by FIDESZ in the tumultuous fall of 2006 as an alternative to the Gyurcsany government, the idea is currently championed by the PM's erstwhile coalition partners, the SzDSz. Party President Gabor Fodor regards a technocratic cabinet as a better option than either the suspended animation of the current government or the acrimony and indecision of an election campaign. Although some in the SzDSz have expressed principled concerns regarding a government of experts (characterizing it as "not unconstitutional" but either "undemocratic" philosophically or "suicidal" politically), party spokesman Jozsef Gulyas continues to cast it as "the pace car necessary to keep us from driving too fast for conditions."

¶4. (C) Interestingly, FIDESZ is no longer leading the charge, with party spokespersons characterizing a government of experts as a temporary option to pave the way for early elections after a period of "crisis management." As the publication Napi Gazdasag observes, FIDESZ may see an expert government making the difficult decisions regarding reform in the near term (and then stepping aside.

POPULAR MECHANICS

¶5. (C) Most supporters of the idea envision a government composed of professional experts with minimal party ties. Although former National Bank President Gyorgy Suranyi) himself frequently mentioned as a possible PM candidate) concedes that "all Hungarians have some (partisan) color," he believes there are enough respected professionals in

academia, in business, and in national institutions to staff a government of experts. To date, most of the names in circulation have been drawn from the National Bank, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the State Audit Service.

¶6. (C) SzDSz officials believe that a government of experts could be installed "overnight," thus avoiding the "long, brutal, populist campaign" which they believe would inevitably precede new elections. As they point out, a new Prime Ministerial candidate could be nominated in Parliament and elected by a vote of fifty percent plus one.

¶7. (C) The constitutional mechanism for the vote would be a "constructive measure of no confidence," which requires the nomination of a new Prime Minister as part of any no confidence vote and provides for immediate transfer of power. By contrast, a successful vote for the dissolution of Parliament would require the same majority and begin a three-month pre-election period, during which the incumbent government would stay on in a caretaker role.

KNOW THE RIGHT THING; DO THE RIGHT THING

¶8. (C) Once in office, the government of experts would) in the words of SzDSz MEPP Istvan Szent-Ivanyi) marshal the courage to "do what everyone knows we must" rather than "making reelection its priority." In the SzDSz's view, this would include "telling the truth to Hungarian voters about the price that needs to be paid to fix the economy."

NOT THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

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¶9. (C) Despite the SzDSz's press, a government of experts is not the only option in play. The independent conservative MDF party is reportedly planning to call for dissolution when Parliament returns to session next week despite the SzDSz's open opposition to the idea, arguing that this would be the best way to "pour clean water into the glass." Gyurcsany confidante Klara Akots tells us this move would only galvanize MSZP support for the PM. "He would be willing to be flexible regarding all alternatives," Akots noted in an oblique reference to Gyurcsany's comments regarding resignation, "but talk of early elections from the opposition only makes the party want to hold on to those red velvet seats (in Parliament)."

COMMENT: REGENCY OR RECEIVERSHIP?

¶10. (C) Hungarians are understandably tempted to see a cabinet of experts as a way to remove a government most dislike and to avoid an opposition many distrust. It would also address the nagging public concern that the system itself is broken and that the parties cannot be trusted to speak truthfully or to act honestly.

¶11. (C) These are tempting arguments in principle but in our view a government of experts would be severely challenged in practice:

- Reaching consensus would require the parties to unite behind a candidate to replace PM Gyurcsany. Although FIDESZ Party President Viktor Orban has joked "you wouldn't believe how many Hungarians could see themselves as Prime Minister," early favorite Andras Simor of the National Bank has already been criticized for his perceived pursuit of the job, and candidates of truly national stature are few and far between.

- With the SzDSz, FIDESZ, and the MDF all eager to claim the credit, an accord on a new Prime Minister could prove elusive no matter how high the frustration with Gyurcsany.

- Given the degree of partisan polarization here, genuinely apolitical figures acceptable to all parties but able to fill out the cabinet may also be harder to find than many seem to believe. (As ICDT Director Ambassador Istvan Gyarmati often

jokes, "I am the only neutral party in Hungary."
Negotiations between the parties over cabinet positions could be protracted, undermining confidence in its political neutrality and prospectively leaving a government of experts right where the minority government is now: adrift at home and unfocused abroad.

- An agreement on a governing platform could prove harder still. Although there is no precedent to guide the formation of a technocratic government, observers here agree that a new Prime Minister would likely want a multipartisan commitment to support at least key elements of a governing agenda. Right now the parties can project onto a government of experts their own policy agendas; finding common ground among their competing substantive platforms will require more cooperation than the opposition parties have demonstrated thus far.

- As for the public, there is no evident consensus about whether reform is necessary, much less which reforms would be the priority. A government of experts is unlikely to make controversial but necessary decisions any more palatable or any more popular with voters who believe reform has already gone too far. As much as Hungarians like to complain about "the crisis," few support crisis management.

¶12. (C) Although it will inevitably remain a topic of conversation, a government of experts would answer only 1 question: how to break the current trench warfare between, among, and within the parties. Whatever its professional credentials, however, it is unlikely to have the party or the public support to answer any others. If the parties are able to agree on a government of experts as the least common denominator, it may have too little political capital and too little substantive latitude to do more than serve only as a bridge to new elections.

Foley